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Practitioner's Essay

Become Visible: Let Your Voice Be Heard

Vu H. Pham, Lauren Emiko Hokoyama,
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Abstract

Since 1982, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP) has been intent on “growing leaders” within Asian Pacific American (APA) communities across the country. LEAP’s founders had a simple yet powerful idea: In order for APA communities to realize their full potential and to foster robust participation in the larger democratic process, those communities must develop leaders in all sectors who can advocate and speak on their behalf. A national, nonprofit organization, LEAP achieves its mission by: Developing people, because leaders are made, not born; Informing society, because leaders know the issues; and Empowering communities, because leaders are grounded in strong, vibrant communities.

I am an invisible man.

No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surrounding, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Introduction

Like the unnamed narrator in Ralph Ellison’s classic novel, *Invisible Man*, Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) are “invisible.” Across

the board, Asian Pacific Americans do not hold key decision or policy-making positions in academia, corporations, non-profit organizations, the public and private sectors or politics. The numbers are truly disturbing, and reveal the lack of influence APAs have in the running of America:

- ◆ APAs account for a mere 2.4 percent of full-time administrators in higher education, and barely 1.4 percent of college and university CEOs (American Council on Education 2005).
- ◆ Within corporations, APAs represent 4.3 percent of total private sector employment and 8.1 percent of professionals, but only a scant 3.1 percent of managers. Compared with other women of color, APA women are more likely to have graduate degrees, but less likely to hold positions within three levels of the CEO (Catalyst 2005).
- ◆ Among Fortune 500 companies, APAs account for 1 percent of corporate board members and less than 1 percent of Board of Director positions in Fortune 1000 companies (Committee of 100 2004).
- ◆ The trend continues in politics, where in 2004, APAs represented almost 5 percent of the U.S. population, but only 1.5 percent of the U.S. Congress.¹ Even in California, where APAs comprise nearly 13 percent of the population, Asians account for only 8 percent of state officeholders.

The dearth of Asian Pacific American leaders, however, is not due to a lack of qualified or interested APAs. It is that the community and APAs are overwhelmingly invisible. Confronted by barriers of institutional racism, limited professional and political opportunities, APAs lack APA role models and mentors and are not, in general, perceived (by either themselves or non-APAs) as “leadership material.” Inarguably,

[t]he dominant cultural paradigm in the United States...has established standards and expectations about who leaders are (e.g., white, male, vocal, individually oriented) and how policy is developed (e.g., “old boys’ networks” or through campaigns that require significant financial investment) (Policy-Link 2003).²

This paradigm poses a serious challenge to encouraging and increasing minority leadership and visibility, despite America's changing racial and ethnic demographics. The catch-22 persists: as long as APAs are invisible, they are less likely to achieve positions of leadership; as long as APAs do not assume leadership roles, the APA community will remain invisible.

The infamous "model minority" thesis that first emerged in the 1960s continues to limit and pigeonhole the APA community. The "benign" stereotype became the newest addition to a historically long list of racialized images of Asians, including the "perpetual foreigner" (i.e., immigrant and never truly American). It supposes that all APAs are "the same"—industrious, enterprising, smart, well educated, polite, passive, hold good values and have strong family ties, make more money than the average American and become successful through quiet achievement. According to the model minority myth, APAs have overcome racism and socio-cultural barriers, and are the ideal role model for other minority groups (i.e., African Americans and Latinos) to emulate. This "divide and conquer" tactic strategically pits people of color against one another, fingering "good" and "bad" minorities. Dangerously, authors have employed this thesis to chastise non-APA minority groups for demanding public assistance and other social programs, while claiming that APAs rarely seek such support (Peterson 1966).³

Moreover, this "super-minority" status denies the diversity of the APA community and permits America to ignore contemporary APA issues like poverty, healthcare, race-based violence, workers' rights, immigration and language access. The term "Asian Pacific American" is a controversial political category that lumps together fifty distinct ethnic (forty-three Asian and Pacific Islander groups, six Central Asian countries of origin and multiracial Asian Pacific Americans), national origin, religious, political, cultural, socio-economic, citizenship, generation and language groups, all with varying immigration histories and settlement patterns. There is no singular "Asian Pacific American," yet this one-dimensional view enables a majority of America to discount and ignore the entire community. It is this concept that renders APAs invisible.

Lacking leaders, the APA community remains more or less unseen by mainstream America. In the mainstream, Asian Pacific America, in fact, does not exist. National and local politicians mar-

ginalize or completely disregard APA community issues. APAs have minimal political clout, and very little influence on public policy. APAs attempting to advance in all sectors are overlooked or hindered by artificial barriers like the glass ceiling. To confront this leadership challenge, four critical issues must be addressed:

APA population growth outpaces all other ethnic groups, but APAs lack a pipeline of effective leaders prepared to take the helm in leading the APA population. The Asian Pacific American population is growing faster than any other in the nation, according to the U.S. Census. Since 1990, the number of APAs grew by 72 percent, as compared to the 58 percent growth by Hispanics. The APA population represents almost 5 percent of the total U.S. population, or approximately 13.5 million. By 2020, the APA population is projected to reach 20 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

Diverse and complex APA issues need to be clarified and understood by APAs, by leaders in the sociopolitical and economic arenas, and by society at large. Asian Pacific Americans are extremely diverse in language, ethnicity, religion, economic status, and cultural and historical backgrounds. This diversity leads to a complexity of needs, compounding the difficulty to realize broad and effectual APA participation on all levels. For instance, efforts to reach out to APA communities are often hampered by linguistic isolation, paucity of political representation and lack of knowledge or access to resources. Particularly vulnerable are emerging Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander communities, with large numbers of new immigrants to the U.S. who have fled poverty and other socioeconomic and political hardships in their homelands.

The history of discrimination, stereotyping and anti-Asian violence creates a need for leaders who understand and can address the issues facing APA communities. Negative stereotyping of APAs has resulted in a history of discrimination (e.g., immigration exclusions, restrictions on naturalization and political participation, labor abuses, racial profiling, mass incarceration) and has strongly influenced how people view APAs and how APAs view themselves. A 2001 survey commissioned by Committee of 100, in association with the Anti-Defamation League, revealed that one-third of all Americans questioned APA loyalty to the U.S. The findings also indicated that one in four Americans would not vote for an APA for President, a higher negative rating than was measured

for African Americans, Jews or women (Committee of 100 2001). Significantly, violent attacks and hate crimes against APAs rose 45 percent between 1993 and 1999 (National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium 1999). In the three-month period following September 11, 2001, the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium documented nearly 250 bias-motivated incidents targeting APAs, particularly South Asians—a stark contrast to the 300-400 anti-Asian attacks and hate crimes typically recorded each year.

The lack of leadership training programs addressing APA barriers to leadership creates a pressing need for leadership education designed specifically to show how APAs can not only break through long-held and change-resistant cultural barriers, but also retain their individual identities and values in becoming more effective leaders. While community-based organizations, political and legal advocacy and university-based activists, researchers and educators work to address issues concerning APAs, there are still relatively few APA leaders. Moreover, existing and potential APA leaders generally have received little or no formal leadership training. Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP) is now positioned to help fill this vacuum, building a foundation of well-prepared APA civic, business, political, academic, non-profit, community and youth leaders.

Increasing Asian Pacific American Visibility:

Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP)

In 1982, a handful of concerned community activists in Los Angeles formed LEAP in response to the need for more and better trained APA leaders. LEAP recognized that APA visibility depended on increasing both the quantity and quality of APA leaders. Since its founding as a volunteer organization, LEAP has been “growing leaders” in Asian Pacific American communities nationwide to increase APA civic participation and national visibility. LEAP’s leadership development philosophy asserts that APAs can retain their culture, identity and values while developing and honing skills necessary for effective leadership within their organizations, communities and broader society.

LEAP’s comprehensive strategy operates by developing people, empowering communities and informing society. Believing that leaders are made, not born, LEAP develops people through targeted training to help individuals across all sectors acquire appro-

priate leadership skills, values and knowledge (e.g., self awareness and confidence; how to be a community representative and a multicultural bridge; embracing diversity as a core value; managing change and ambiguity; building teams and coalitions). Specifically, LEAP challenges individuals to achieve greater self-awareness and recognize that traditional Asian cultural values, such as humility and self-sacrifice, while seemingly at odds with “American” leadership qualities, do not have to be abandoned. In other words, APAs are not required to negate their “Asian-ness” to become effective leaders in mainstream America.

LEAP breaks down the complex relationship among perceptions, behaviors and values, and reveals how this rapport can function in the workplace and society at large. While everyone exhibits specific cultural values by his or her behavior, the key is to discern how others may interpret such behavior through their own cultural lenses. The assumption that everyone is more or less “the same” is a major cause of misunderstanding in professional and social relationships, and one that consistently recurs in APA / non-APA dealings. The point is not simply to criticize non-APAs who misread the behavior of Asians, but rather to help them better appreciate APA values, and thus, to better interpret APA behavior. Moreover, APAs need to be fully aware of how cultural values influence their behavior and to understand how non-Asians may judge their conduct. For example, an APA may demonstrate respect for authority by being quiet in a meeting or taking notes rather than asking questions. However, this behavior might be misinterpreted as being passive, arrogant or disinterested. Similarly, the concepts of shame or “saving face” may inhibit an APA from speaking in front of large audiences, but this does not necessarily indicate that the individual does not have public speaking or presentation skills. The disparity between these perceptions can lead to tension, resentment or conflict. Such cultural miscommunication, reinforced by the model minority myth, continually undermines the advancement of APAs. To become leaders, APAs must comprehend the formal and informal mainstream value systems and workplace culture that operate in the public, private and independent sectors, and then develop the appropriate skills to be effective within these diverse environments. Asians must also recognize how they might misconstrue the behavior of those around them. APAs and non-APAs cannot assume that they act, perceive or respond to the world in the

same manner or adhere to identical values. While APAs need to develop and practice a wider repertoire of skills to be more successful leaders in the workplace and society, non-APAs need to meet APAs halfway by developing a better understanding of Asians and consciously eliminating barriers to APA participation.

Developing APA leaders, in turn, empowers the specific communities to which they belong. LEAP believes that successful leaders must be both schooled in and responsible to strong, vibrant communities. PolicyLink's 2003 report concurs that,

[l]eadership programs that recruit community leaders who are grounded in, representative of, and committed to serving low-income communities and communities of color will have the most success in developing effective leaders. To be effective, leaders need to be responsive and accountable to their communities and rely on input from resident voices in identifying policy targets" (PolicyLink 2003).

LEAP not only promotes the cultivation of new community leaders, but also strengthens the effectiveness of existing community-based organizations and establishes a supportive network for mutual assistance, resource sharing and collaborative problem solving. The impact of LEAP's training goes beyond its initial delivery. LEAP's model trains community leaders so that they can develop and empower others. Responding to the urgent needs of rapidly emerging APA communities, this long-term strategy will build community infrastructure, mobilize a national network of APA leaders and create an ongoing dialogue concerning key policy issues such as hate crimes, poverty, education, immigration, affirmative action and workers' rights. LEAP believes leaders must be informed on issues concerning APAs to be capable representatives of their constituents and to be effective participants in the decision-making process that affects their communities. Subsequently, LEAP helps inform APA and non-APA communities through compilation, analysis and dissemination of information on current issues that directly and indirectly affect APAs. Since 1992, LEAP's Public Policy Institute (PPI) has been a crucial source of up-to-date demographic information and policy analysis, committed to raising public awareness of the status of APAs and providing a critical voice for APAs in today's policy debates. With original research and support from a diverse, knowledgeable group of community

and academic advocates, the PPI has provided twelve publications over fifteen years that investigate the multifaceted nature of APA life in the twenty-first century.

LEAP is one of the only national APA organizations to offer such extensive leadership training. Through original programs and curriculum, LEAP identifies, recruits and trains current and future leaders. Over the past twenty-three years, LEAP has provided over 2,000 workshops to more than 100,000 students, educators, public and private sector individuals, non-profit and community-based staff and volunteers. LEAP's corporate leadership programs have nearly 2,500 alumni representing more than 100 Fortune 500 companies. Over 190 individuals have graduated from the Leadership Development Program in Higher Education. A number of these graduates have been promoted to advanced leadership roles in academic institutions. Seventy-five Community Roundtables and Community Forums across the country have provided an important opportunity for APA ethnic community leaders to meet, build networks and discuss policy issues and challenges. Additionally, LEAP's summer internship program, Leadership in Action, has graduated fifty-six APA students, representing twenty-five colleges and universities.

Working Together

To transform LEAP philosophy into practical and effective practice, LEAP hopes that this essay will also serve as an opportunity for fruitful collaborations. LEAP provides original leadership programs and workshops for staff and volunteers at APA community organizations, high school and college students and employees at corporations, government agencies and institutions of higher education throughout the nation. They are specifically tailored to address the concerns and issues of APAs within each group. LEAP also offers training for non-Asians to facilitate their understanding of and interaction with their APA counterparts in all sectors of American society.

LEAP's unique training is client based; LEAP does not host open workshops. To continue developing leaders, LEAP relies heavily on word-of-mouth recommendations to promote its workshops and programs. In general, LEAP finds that employees in the public, private and educational sectors who attend its workshops are also volunteers in non-profit and community-based organizations.

This confluent network of contacts and referrals exposes LEAP to a diversity of groups and creates additional opportunities for LEAP to conduct leadership training. This mutual support system reflects the need and relevance of developing appropriate leadership skills in and out of the workplace. Engaging with a variety of groups and individuals in all sectors allows LEAP to continue its mission to achieve full participation and equality of APAs through leadership, empowerment and policy.

LEAP's main goal is to get APAs involved in any leadership capacity—in corporations, professional organizations, employee network and affinity groups, politics, the public sector, community organizations, higher education, and religious or cultural institutions. It is a constant challenge to convince APAs of the importance of participation on all levels and in all sectors. Like anything else, leaders need to hone their skills through constant, dedicated practice. To increase APA visibility, it is imperative that APA communities develop spokespersons who are accountable to and can articulate their community's issues and viewpoints, and who will shape and influence policy, rather than rely on others to speak for them. APAs must educate non-Asians about the APA community, and help them reject commonly held stereotypes and misperceptions. Ultimately, APAs must move beyond self-involved identity politics and address important social and workplace issues—that affect APAs and other minority groups alike—such as institutional racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, immigrant rights, workers' rights, and affirmative action.

As a community, individually and collectively, Asian Pacific Americans are invisible. APAs can only become visible and more politically and socially empowered by taking risks, getting involved and consciously making a commitment to achieve positions of responsibility while encouraging and mentoring others to do the same. Asian Pacific Americans must aspire to become leaders in order to fully contribute to their local, national and global communities. Only then will APAs have a voice, gain influence and create positive social change.

Notes

We would like to acknowledge the LEAP Board of Directors and staff for their commitment and hard work. Thank you for your support and continued optimism.

1. APAs are politically under-represented among voters and elected officials, highlighting a gap in preparation, skills and awareness. The low number of elected APA officials is only partly due to the low percentage of APA voter registration (53 percent)—the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups. As a largely immigrant community, APAs face many challenges to full democratic participation, including language access, unfamiliarity or lack of knowledge concerning the American political process.
2. In 2001 the Hewlett Foundation commissioned PolicyLink, a national non-profit advocacy and research organization, to evaluate the barriers and opportunities for leaders of color who aspire to shape public policy, and to make recommendations on how to increase their numbers, visibility and impact on both the local and national scale. Through extensive research on existing leadership development programs, national focus groups and interviews with leaders from academia, the public and private sectors, non-profit and community based organizations, PolicyLink produced the 2003 report, *Leadership for Policy Change: Strengthening Communities of Color Through Leadership Development*. PolicyLink determined that dynamic and culturally sensitive leadership training is the key to providing the necessary skills and encouraging the participation of individuals of color to become leaders not only within their specific communities, but in broader society as well. This publication may be obtained from the PolicyLink website, www.policylink.org.
3. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 11.5 percent of Asians and/or Pacific Islanders live below poverty level, compared to 9.4 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, 21.4 percent of Hispanics (of any race), 24.9 percent of Blacks and 25.1 percent of Native Americans. Meanwhile, 2.2 percent of Asians are on public assistance, compared to 1.3 percent of Whites, 3.5 percent of Hispanics, 4.5 percent of Blacks and 6.1 percent of Native Americans. The median income for Asian Americans is \$59,000—higher than any other group. Clearly poverty is a major concern for the APA community, as well as the growing disparity between “rich” and “poor” Asians. Furthermore, many Asian Pacific Americans living in poverty do not seek any form of federal or state public assistance, oftentimes due to lack of knowledge about available services, confusing bureaucratic red tape or language access. It is also important to consider the age, generation, immigration status and ethnicity of APAs living in poverty and/or receiving public assistance. For example, Cambodians, Hmong and Laotians lead Asians in receiving federal public assistance.

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